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Unveiling Corporeal Feminism: Deconstructing Female Villain Archetypes in *Maleficent*

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to critically analyze the 2014 film *Maleficent* from a corporeal feminist perspective, examining the interconnectedness of women's bodies, sexuality, and their portrayal as monsters. The research aims to unravel the construction of monstrous femininity monstrosity in *Maleficent* (2014), exploring its correlation with the main character, Maleficent who is branded as both hero and villain. It then challenges the binary categorization of good and evil by portraying Maleficent as Aurora's godmother. Even in her role as a mother and nurturer, Maleficent defies traditional patriarchal depictions of motherhood. The methodology involves a comprehensive analysis of the film, utilizing a corporeal feminist perspective. The researcher examines scenes and themes related to women's bodies, sexuality, and the juxtaposition of monstrosity and motherhood. A critical approach is employed to deconstruct traditional gender roles and portrayals within the narrative. Lastly, the paper discusses how presenting Maleficent as both a monster and a mother becomes an agentic representation, fostering empowerment and autonomy. Such research further paves way for analyses of cinematic representations consider alternative perspectives, challenging established gender norms.

| KEYWORDS | Corporeal Feminism, Maleficent, Monstrous Feminine, Monstrous Maternity |

Introduction

Corporeal feminism centers on the lived experiences of women's bodies, acknowledging that these experiences are shaped by societal, cultural, and political factors. It explores how societal norms and cultural influences contribute to the construction and perception of the female body, impacting women's identity and self-perception. Monstrous femininity refers to the portrayal of women, often in literature, media, or cultural narratives, as monstrous or deviating from traditional feminine norms. These depictions often involve challenging or subverting societal expectations, leading to the characterization of women as threatening, powerful, or transgressive. The paper seeks to redefine female monstrosity within the film, *Maleficent*, portraying it not as an inherently malevolent sexual figure, but rather as a nurturing maternal image. This depiction extends beyond the conventional patriarchal understanding of female fecundity. The aim is to demonstrate how presenting the monstrous female in this light can serve as a form of empowerment. The film reimagines the classic fairy tale of "Sleeping Beauty" from the perspective of the iconic villain Maleficent. The story delves into the untold origins of Maleficent, exploring the events that changed her from a powerful and kind-hearted fairy living in the magical Moors into the dark and vengeful character. Moreover, the paper delves into the transformation of Maleficent's monstrosity, highlighting her shift from an embodiment of evil to a benevolent godmother for Aurora. This evolution challenges

traditional patriarchal representations of motherhood and nurturing, demonstrating how her unconventional choice reclaims autonomy and redefines the concept of monstrous maternity. Such portrayal contradicts the traditional interpretation of mothers as solely gentle and self-sacrificing, emphasizing that maternal figures can embody a spectrum of qualities beyond the stereotypical expectations.

Let us tell an old story anew, and we will see how well you know it. Once upon a time, there were two kingdoms that were the worst of neighbors. So vast was the discord between them that it was said that only a great hero or a terrible villain might bring them together. (Stromberg, 2014, 00:00-01:05)

Literature Review

Canguilhem (2005) observes that the word, "monster" calls forth the simultaneous feelings of repulsion, encompassing fear, terror, and disgust, alongside an allure or fascination. He takes monstrous corporeality as a repellent attribute and something unimportant. Like Canguilhem, Foucault (2003) also delimits the issue of physical monstrosity. He argues that in modern times, it's not the physical, but the behavioral or moral monstrosity that holds a special place as monstrous. Both Canguilhem and Foucault have not fully acknowledged the necessity of the discourse regarding the corporeal monstrosity and hence, leave a gap for further exploration of monstrous corporeality, especially, the monstrous feminine. Furthermore, the monstrous other is not only silenced but is also perceived as speechless unseeing, and denied agency (Shildrick, 2018).

Monstrosity and repulsiveness, much like concepts of beauty or perfect form, are ultimately shaped by social and aesthetic constructs. According to Asa Mittman (2012), understanding the monster comes not from direct observation but from recognizing its effects and impact. On the other hand, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (2018) contends that the fear of monsters is essentially a form of desire. In essence, when we examine monsters, we are not merely seeking to observe them but to comprehend their influence, acknowledging that our fear of them is intricately linked to a hidden desire.

Throughout history, the horror film makers or fantasy writers have presented the antihero's body as something grotesque, serving as a conduit for trauma, torture, mutilation and death. Such portrayal erases any emphatic feelings regarding the vulgar deformities of the evil body. The body has been portrayed as a vessel for possession, a source of sexual menace, violence, and exploitation, a target for diseases and integration, and a stage for difference and monstrosity. The recurring use of the body as a focal point for horror and evilness within the genre underscores its significance in the exploration of identity politics. By presenting various forms of corporeal violation, these media portrayals utilize bodies to scrutinize and comment on cultural constructs of otherness. Marie Mulvey-Roberts (2018) delivers an extensive examination of *Dangerous Bodies* in Gothic genre to highlight the threating impacts of monstrous Other.

The archives of the monstrous contain abundant negative imagery, often coinciding with the devaluation of disabled bodies. While the connection between disability and monstrosity has recently gained attention, there has long been a thorough analysis of how monstrous discourse and representation serve racism. Susan Stewart (1993) points out the colonialist and racist undertones of displays that effectively map and fix the characteristics of the strange in a permanent present. Stewart describes this process as a form of colonization, where the cultural other is both naturalized and domesticated, symbolizing the naming of the frontier and asserting control over the wilderness.

Shildrick (1999) states that the monstrous corporeality and femininity in the 21st century has reinforced clear distinction between the self and the Other. Even the body modification of any type viewed as a departure from natural biological features. Despite the efforts of disrupting the established boundaries of self/Other, the persistence of the Other complicates the attainment of complete self-sameness. In such category the rebellious woman is seen as abnormal, monstrous and grotesque; a threat to the natural conventional order. Individually, the monster was frequently linked to sexual transgressions, while on a larger scale, its presence could signify the corruption—politically, morally, and sexually—of entire societies. Similar notion has been presented by Waldenfels (2011). In his work, *Phenomenology of the Alien: Basic Concept*, the corporeal self is often perceived as foreign and threatening. Additionally, he states that when the Other is in close proximity, it intensifies the activation of boundaries between the realms of one's own identity and the foreign.

Hadley (2008) terms the monstrous Other as "freaks". He views the freak show as a cultural theater deserving of critical analysis due to its significant role in framing, reinforcing, and transforming notions of the body and bodily differences within the context of modernity. Freakshow acts as a theatrical space that maps societal anxieties regarding corporeal differences onto 'acceptable' bodies. According to Bogdan (2014), being a freak extends beyond mere biological facts. The personas of freaks, such as the fat lady, bearded lady, hermaphrodite, and geek in Western culture, are created through performative isolation, manipulation, and exaggeration of specific human body characteristics. The visual mechanisms of the freak show, functioning as a theater and a cabinet of corporeal curiosities, captivate spectators by showcasing and educating them about extraordinary bodies, thereby endorsing specific modes of seeing and looking that contribute to the production of freakish bodies.

While, Falvey (2021) delves into contemporary body horror within film and media studies, highlighting a renewed emphasis on a particular manifestation of otherness: the exploitation, violation, and destruction of the monstrous female body. According to Falvey, the female body in modern horror cinema assumes dynamic and evolving roles, serving as a primary means of expressing societal apprehensions regarding sex and violence. In this exploration, the portrayal both exploits and challenges prevailing notions of the female as a monster or Other.

Material and Methods

The methodology for this research involves a qualitative approach, employing a corporeal feminist lens to analyze the 2014 film *Maleficent*. This study utilizes textual analysis as the primary method, closely examining scenes, dialogues, and visual elements that highlight women's bodies, sexuality, and the construction of monstrous femininity. A critical discourse analysis is applied to deconstruct the narrative, identifying power dynamics, gender representations, and societal norms by including an intersectional approach, acknowledging the interconnectedness of various identity markers such as gender, sexuality, and motherhood. This ensures a nuanced examination of how these elements contribute to the portrayal of female monstrosity in *Maleficent*.

Monstrous Feminine

Before delving into the female monstrosity, we need to pursue what monstrosity or being monster means. Judith Halberstam defines monstrosity as a historical product rather than the psychological phenomenon (1998, p. 6). It is political and cultural outcome of othering someone according to one's race, class or skin. Similar notion has been taken by

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. He defines the monster "as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place" (2018, p. 43). While Elizabeth Grosz's definition of "freaks" also play a vital role in defining the monstrous "other". She states that the freaks are the embodiment of horror and fascination. They are those humans "who exist outside the structure of binary oppositions ... They occupied the impossible middle ground between binary pairs…They imperil the very definitions we rely on to classify humans, identities, sexes – our most fundamental categories of self-definition" (1997, p. 25). Hence, the monster is defined as some entity which is "violent, dark and beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1).

Barbara Creed takes Kristeva's discussion of the abject and presents the new term "monstrous feminine" defining a monstrous image of a woman "that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (1993, p. 1). Creed's analysis delves into the connection between monstrous depictions of women and men's conflicting feelings towards maternal figures. She contends that female monsters serve as a lens to comprehend the darker aspects of the patriarchal unconscious, specifically the profound ambivalence towards nurturing mothers. Creed suggests that these monstrous portrayals highlight the unsettling blend of nurturing and, through various physical and psychic transitions, the challenging separations crucial for a child's symbolic integration. Implicit in Creed's exploration is an emphasis on portraying women as both perilous and grotesque, exposing men's unease regarding female authority (1993, p. 166). However, in *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body*, Jane M. Ussher's articulates that the female body is not essentially abject, but rather has "been positioned as such" because women's productiveness is perceived as dangerous (2006, p. 7). This fear of female fecundity is "at the heart of the splitting of woman into Madonna or whore, monster or angel" (2006, p. 7). Examining these dichotomies, particularly the contrast between the monster and the angel, is essential in the discourse on female identity. The archetypes of the whore and the monster distinctly outline societal expectations, delineating what women are perceived to avoid embodying.

Monstrous femininity is often constructed as a threat to patriarchal power structures. Women who challenge or resist traditional gender roles are portrayed as monstrous to maintain the status quo and discourage deviation from prescribed norms. Maleficent is one of the examples. She is a rebel from the start. Her free spirited nature and her reign over the Moors is a threat to King Henry for whom the concept of female authority is a blasphemy. That is why, he doesn't consider his own daughter qualified enough to rule and asks the men of his kingdom to exhibit chivalry and "manliness" by killing the "wicked" Maleficent. At that time she is labeled monstrous only because she is a physical threat to the patriarchal power. But later, when Maleficent becomes "a mistress of evil", the fear strengthens to a point of disgust and hatred. Maleficent, a horned fairy/witch-monster, possesses the ability to fly, materializes unexpectedly, transforms into a dragon, controls the thunderous sky, and, notably, casts death curses at an infant christening to which she is not invited. Her power surpasses that of any benevolent fairy or god. The fear of Maleficent taking over other kingdoms, that can inspire others to follow suit, creates unprecedented threat to male population. Creed termed this fear and anxiety as Abjection (2006, p. 20).

Monstrous femininity is often symbolically linked to the concept of "otherness". This symbolism explores themes of alienation, marginalization, and the psychological impact of being perceived as different or monstrous. The social construct of monstrous femininity serves as a tool for controlling women's behavior by instilling fear and reinforcing gender-based expectations. It contributes to the policing of women's autonomy

and agency. That's what Stefan wants to do at first by mutilating Maleficent's body and cutting off her wings but when he can't control her, he takes drastic measures to execute her. Stefan imposes his own limitations, opting to diminish himself, onto Maleficent, holding her accountable for his deficiencies, leading to mutual suffering. Interestingly, the movie centered on the politics of killing Maleficent rather than any other threat of war from any other kingdom. It seems that Maleficent's womanhood is an ultimate threat that needs to be addressed more than delving into any other political agenda. Hence, the wild and unconstrained femininity of Maleficent unmistakably becomes a posing threat that can infiltrate and disrupt the sanctity of the social order. What redefines Maleficent as a victim rather than a malicious, evil being is not only the intended rape Stefan has done but also the maternal feeling that Maleficent develops for Aurora, the daughter of Stefan.

Monstrous Maternity: Redefining Motherhood

The maternal love that Maleficent has shown for Aurora in the film is not the conventional love of motherhood as defined by patriarchy but it is the unconventional bond between a girl and her supposed fairy godmother. That's why, it is termed "monstrous maternity" here. As monstrous femininity shows deviance from conventional portrayal of women, similarly monstrous maternity also redefines the element of nurturing and mothering. Monstrous female figures challenge simplistic portrayals of mothers by depicting complex, multidimensional characters. Monstrous femininity in literature critiques traditional maternal narratives. Characters challenge expectations associated with motherhood, exploring the complexities, contradictions, and unconventional aspects of maternal figures that defy societal norms. In other words, even though motherhood is often seen as a system defined by men for oppression, women's individual experiences of nurturing can still emerge as a source of empowerment. As Adrienne Rich states about motherhood in *Of Woman Born*, "The child gains her first sense of her own existence from the mother's responsive gestures and expressions…And the mother, too, is discovering her own existence newly" (2021, p. 36). Rich also describes her own experience of motherhood that how she detests the concept at first only because it is a male centered discourse but after being a mother, she longs for a new child growing inside her. While encountering a mother with a two weeks old infant, Rich declares, "I am amazed to feel in myself a passionate longing to have, once again, such a small, new being clasped against my body…I envy the sensuality of having an infant of two weeks curled against one's breasts" (2021, p. 33). That feeling of envy and the countless narratives Rich has talked about in the book acknowledges that there is no singular, normative form of motherhood. It embraces the multiplicity of maternal experiences, allowing for narratives that reflect the challenges, joys, and complexities of mothering.

Although, motherhood can be liberating only if it is one's own choice. Aurora is not Maleficent's daughter. In fact, she is the child that Maleficent cursed on her christening, "before the sun sets on her 16th birthday, she will prick her finger on the spindle of a spinning wheel and fall into a sleep like death, a sleep from which she will never awaken… The princess can be woken from her death sleep, but only by true love's kiss" (Stromberg, 2014, 31:03-32:05). Right from the start, Maleficent is portrayed divorced from any love for the child. It is afterwards when she sees her with the fairies that are quite incompetent, she starts longing to connect with her. Her longing is similar to what Rich has described. While Maleficent watches Aurora grow, she somehow sees herself in her, the purity that she once had. She takes Aurora as her own by calling her "Beasty" and it is her kiss that wakes Aurora which establishes that there is no true love than the love of a mother for her child. However, it is important to establish here that the love that Maleficent entails is not a male-defined love of a mother. Traditional mothers often lack agency, while Maleficent actively shapes her destiny and reclaims power. She introduces moral ambiguity, challenging the

traditional dichotomy of entirely virtuous or entirely evil mothers. Her use of magical abilities challenges conventional expressions of nurturing seen in traditional tales. Moreover, her character showcases autonomy and independence, differing from traditional portrayals that often confine mothers within societal expectations. Hence, Maleficent's evolving relationship with Aurora goes beyond the predictable patterns seen in traditional mother-child dynamics. Maleficent's mothering is monstrous maternity that involves fierce and protective instincts, challenging the perception that mothers should only embody nurturing qualities. Hence, expands the notion of nurturing to include unconventional forms of care and protection. It prompts a reevaluation of what constitutes effective and meaningful maternal care beyond traditional expectations.

Agency and Empowerment

By challenging the traditional depiction of Maleficent as an evil character and emphasizing her unconventional motherly affection for Aurora, the paper shifts its focus to articulate how portraying female monsters in this way is not inherently violent, repulsive, or degrading. Instead, it is depicted as a source of agency and empowerment. Monstrous femininity challenges the trope of women as passive victims by portraying characters who actively assert their agency. Female figures in these narratives navigate their own paths, make choices, and challenge the expectation that women should be passive in the face of adversity. Monstrous femininity often symbolizes reclamation of power. Female characters may wield symbolic power that challenges traditional patriarchal structures. This symbolism becomes a commentary on women's empowerment and their ability to subvert established power dynamics. The 2014 film adaptation of *Maleficent*, directed by Robert Stromberg, aimed to present a reimagined version of Sleeping Beauty that bestowed empowerment and complexity upon the traditionally portrayed villain, Maleficent, embodying themes of female empowerment. This empowerment transforms her into a sort of villainous heroine, not only acquiring power but symbolically overshadowing the male characters in the narrative. The physical transformation of Maleficent in the film mirrors this ascent to power. Initially depicted as kind, youthful, and lively, she undergoes a shift towards bitterness, vengeance, and malice as her empowerment unfolds.

Maleficent's victimization becomes the catalyst for her empowerment; despite being a strong, intelligent character developed throughout the plot, her empowerment is catalyzed by the horrific acts perpetrated against her by a man. This narrative also serves as a commentary on the empowerment within the context of feminism. Maleficent is never shown passive in the film. She first becomes the protector of Moor, and then becomes its queen. Even when she has lost her wings, she never falters but becomes stronger. She embraces the monstrosity not as being a grotesque figure but as an unconventional fairy who refuses to bow before masculine power of King Henry and King Stefan. The allure lies not just in observing a compelling villain's misdeeds but in witnessing someone who confronts societal norms, defies easy categorization, and holds the power to navigate and rectify a system stacked against her. It becomes imperative to redefine the traditional male-centric notion of a villainess into one who disrupts the narrative of male supremacy.

In the end, my kingdom was united not by a hero or a villain, but by one who was both hero and villain. And her name was Maleficent. (Stromberg, 2014, 01:27:28-01:27:32)

Conclusion

Corporeal feminism often involves activism, seeking to empower women by addressing and challenging oppressive structures related to their bodies. It contributes to

the deconstruction of traditional gender norms by questioning and challenging expectations placed on women based on their bodies. Feminist perspectives seek to redefine what it means to be the "Other" or the "Monster". Instead of perpetuating the alienation of women who deviate from norms, these representations aim to humanize and normalize diverse experiences of femininity. Monstrous femininity embraces nuanced portrayals of female characters. Rather than reducing them to one-dimensional archetypes, these narratives explore the complexity of their personalities, including flaws and imperfections. This humanizing approach challenges idealized notions of femininity and emphasizes the strength inherent in embracing one's complexity. *Maleficent* disrupts the binaries between human and non-human by presenting Maleficient as kind strong and motherly character. Analyzing *Maleficent* (2014) through the lens of corporeal feminism, it becomes evident that the portrayal of female villains as monstrous or witch-like reflects societal attitudes towards women who defy traditional norms. The film's depiction of Maleficent reinforces the idea that powerful and assertive women are often labeled as dark or evil, contributing to the broader discourse on gender stereotypes and the fear of female empowerment. The re-telling of the tale also opens new doors for re-interpretations of the traditional fairy tales under the lens of corporeal feminism. Additionally, scholars and filmmakers are encouraged to explore and portray complex, agentic characters that defy conventional categorizations, fostering a more inclusive and empowering cinematic landscape.

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